

DESATOYA MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 51,262 acres

The Desatoya Mountains WSA (NV-030-110/060-288) lies along the Churchill County - Lander County line, with the majority of the WSA found in the southeast corner of Churchill County, Nevada. The WSA includes 51,262 acres of BLM lands. There are 120 acres of private inholdings. The area is bounded by the Carroll Summit Highway (Old U.S. 50) and a section line on the south, and section lines and a short stretch of U.S. Highway 50 on the west. A powerline and three dirt roads comprise the northern boundary, while a combination of private property lines and dirt roads form the boundary on the east.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 43,180 acres recommended for wilderness 8,222 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The 43,180 acres recommended for wilderness designation include all of the Desatoya Mountains WSA except for the northeast portion of the area and a small parcel in the far southeast. Also included are 140 acres outside the WSA, the addition of which would enhance manageability of the area. Besides being extremely scenic, the area is ecologically diverse. There are several distinct vegetative communities and numerous riparian areas supporting complex plant and animal communities. The landscape is extremely varied and includes steep canyon walls, cliffs, rock outcrops and a long undulating ridgeline. A variety of animals including mountain lion, mule deer, gray fox, sage grouse, red-tailed hawks, golden eagles, and pika can be seen in the WSA.

With the exception of a few range improvements and ways, the area retains an extremely natural character. Indeed, the exemplary quality of this naturalness was a key consideration in recommending a portion of the WSA for wilderness designation. Solitude opportunities are outstanding throughout the WSA. Recreational values are exceptional. Hiking, camping, hunting, cross-country skiing, horseback riding, wildlife observation and photography all combine to offer some of the best primitive recreational opportunities in central and western Nevada.

Conflicts with other resource uses are minimal. There are no identified mineral or energy resources within the study area and no mining claims have been located. The area is manageable as wilderness due to its extreme ruggedness, lack of major intrusions and absence of complicating factors such as private inholdings or known mineral reserves.

Two areas on the east side of the WSA are recommended for uses other than wilderness. A 7,913 acre area was excluded from the wilderness recommendation due to a combination of resource conflicts and only moderate wilderness values. A second parcel of 309 acres was deleted in response to concerns raised by the State of Nevada during the Governor's consistency review and to provide a more logical, manageable and easily identifiable boundary.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Desatoya Mountains WSA is in a natural state with little evidence of human imprints. Most of the area is quite rugged and numerous peaks and ridges rise above 9,000 feet. Deeply cut canyons on the west side of the WSA contain fascinating rock formations and riparian ecological communities. Dominant vegetation types are pinyon-juniper woodland and Great Basin sagebrush communities. No mineral or energy exploration activities have taken place within the study area and the only man-made features found in the unit are approximately 4 miles of fenceline, 6 spring developments, 1 watering trough and about 8 miles of ways divided among 12 separate segments.

B. Solitude: The Desatoya Mountains WSA contains outstanding opportunities for solitude. The west side of the WSA is characterized by deep confined canyons, many of them with steep cliffs and rock outcrops which open into small basins at the higher elevations. Most of these canyons and many of the basins are lined with riparian vegetation. Isolated stands of mountain mahogany combine with a general pinyon-juniper cover on the steep hillsides to provide excellent topographic and vegetative screening. East of the main ridgeline the topography is more rolling and not as highly dissected, however, topographic screening is still good due to the large number of drainages in the area.

Since 1968, the Fallon Naval Air Station (NAS) has conducted air warfare training in the airspace over the four WSAs in this part of the District. However, the WSA is situated roughly fifteen miles east of Dixie Valley, the main corridor used by naval aircraft during their training missions. Consequently, impacts on solitude are less than in the other three WSAs.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The Desatoya Mountains WSA has recreational opportunities that are outstanding both from a qualitative and quantitative standpoint. These include day hiking, backpacking, camping, hunting, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, wildlife observation and nature study. In virtually every case, the visitor would enjoy a high quality experience.

D. Special Features: Several distinct vegetative communities are found between the base of the range at 5400 feet and the top of Desatoya Peak at 9973 feet -- sagebrush-greasewood, pinyon-juniper, mountain mahogany, and riparian areas. Indeed, the fact that there are eleven perennial streams and nearly a dozen intermittent ones indicates the importance of riparian areas to the overall ecologic balance of the study area.

The area is highly scenic. Views looking outside the study area toward the Shoshone and Toiyabe Ranges on the east and the Clan Alpine, Stillwater and Sierra Nevada Ranges on the west are outstanding. There are numerous canyons, ridges, riparian areas and rock outcrops throughout the interior of the WSA which are extremely scenic. Weathering of the rocks has created much of the geologic interest and beauty found in the WSA. The Big Dens and Willow Creek areas are well known locally for their scenic quality.

The Cold Springs Pony Express station (1860-61) is located just outside the WSA. An Overland Stage station ruins is found on the Edwards Creek boundary road. Portions of the western and northern boundaries of the study area follow the old Pony Express and stage routes. Woodcarvings made by Basque shepherders on aspen trees during the early 1900's can still be seen in several drainages. On many small knolls throughout the area one can still find lithic scatters, evidence of use of the area by its former Native American inhabitants. A total of 15 aboriginal and four historic sites have been identified to date.

Cutthroat trout are present in Edwards and Smith Creeks, and Brook trout are found in Big Dens Creek. Although these fish are small, their mere presence is relatively unusual in this part of Nevada. Desert bighorn sheep were successfully reintroduced into the WSA in the summer of 1986. Approximately 100-125 wild horses are estimated to live within the study area.

4. MANAGEABILITY

There are no private lands in the part of the study area recommended suitable and no mining claims have been located there. No development of energy or mineral resources is anticipated and exploration for such resources is unlikely. Although the western boundary follows a legal description for over fifteen miles, this boundary coincides closely with the topographic break between the benchland and the mountainous portion of the unit. Access is limited and the boundary should not be difficult to locate along the few cherrystem roads found there. The only potential management

problem of consequence would be control of off-road vehicles along the ways and cherrystem roads of the more open and less rugged terrain of the area's east side. This problem would be most profound during hunting season.

Immediately adjacent to the largest parcel of land not recommended suitable (7,913 acres) is 120 acres of private land owned by a local rancher. It is unlikely that significant nonconforming developments would take place on this land. With the exception of fences, a cherrystem road and a way in this area provide access to all of the range improvements in the WSA.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The area has no identified mineral resources and no tracts having high potential for undiscovered mineral resources were delineated. A small area in the northern third of the study area has a low to moderate potential for gold and silver resources.

In the acreage recommended for nonwilderness, metallic mineral potential is believed to be low to moderate. Weak copper, mercury, uranium and/or zinc anomalies were identified here. There is no potential for undiscovered resources of oil, gas, geothermal energy or sand and gravel in the study area. No critical or strategic minerals are known to occur within the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

A total of 34 comments, which specifically mentioned the Desatoya Mountains WSA, were received on the draft EIS. Twenty-nine commentors supported wilderness designation for all or part of the WSA. Five commentors supported no wilderness for the WSA.

Those favoring wilderness mentioned the area's unique ecosystems, high scenic quality, and outstanding solitude and primitive recreation opportunities. Those opposing designation cited the area's mineral potential and stated that the area has limited solitude opportunities due to aircraft overflights.

The National Park Service, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of the Navy, the State of Nevada and the Churchill County and Lander County Commissioners all commented on the draft EIS. The Park Service was concerned about preservation of cultural resources. The Department of the Navy felt that wilderness designation could constrain air warfare training activities at some future date. The Governor of Nevada's consistency review supported the Desatoya Mountains for wilderness designation if a slight modification could be made in the southeast boundary. This was done and the State now supports the Proposed Action. The Churchill County Commissioners agreed that the Desatoya Mountains have some merit as wilderness but, due to low-level military flights and possible mineral potential, they felt it should remain as nonwilderness. The Lander County Commissioners adopted a resolution generally opposing any wilderness designations in the county. The other agencies did not identify any specific jurisdictional conflicts.

Three comment letters were received on the final EIS. The EPA supported the Proposed Action. The Department of the Navy felt that certain terms in the document required clarification. Two individuals submitted a general protest letter which stated that the EIS violated NEPA and should be totally rewritten.